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AUTHOR Lopez-Emslie, Julia Rosa
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ABSTRACT

A study to determine the role of oral language and reading skills in the transfer from two years of reading in Spanish to reading in English had as subjects 191 fourth grade students in a bilingual education program. Students were tested and classified as efficient and non-efficient readers. It was found that: (1) there is a relationship between oral English language proficiency and English reading proficiency; (2) a relationship exists between Spanish and English reading proficiency; (3) certain skills were identifiable as indicative of reading efficiency or non-efficiency; (4) the "Inventario de Destrezas" does not identify the same Spanish reading skills as does a standardized reading test in Spanish; (5) the "Inventario de Destrezas" serves as a good indicator of reading ability 60% of the time; (6) the Oral Language Dominance Measure is a good indicator of future English reading success; (7) student age and sex do not make a significant difference when students are tested in Spanish and English reading; (8) birthplace and income level are significant when students are tested in English reading; and (10) English reading performance varies by school. It is suggested that some of the tests used to make student transfer decisions should be revised, and that a model suggested by the results of this study would supply information about specific skills transferable and non-transferable from Spanish to English reading. In addition, criterion-referenced tests are recommended over standardized tests as a means of assessing actual student learning. (MSE)

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THE ROLE OF ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING IN THE TRANSFER OF SKILLS FROM SPANISH TO ENGLISH READING

Julia Rosa López-Emslie

Eastern New Mexico University

Introduction

Today I will be addressing several areas which are of great concern to those of us involved in the teaching of reading to students whose first or dominant language is not English. First, I would like to present some of the research findings which are applicable to the topic of transferability of skills from first language (L_1) to second language reading. Second, I will report on a study which was conducted using students in a bilingual program who learned to read in Spanish and at the end of two years were transferred to reading in English. Third, I will present a series of practical applications for transferring children from reading in L_1 to reading in L_2.

Related Research

The Center for Applied Linguistics conducted a survey of bilingual programs and their effects. In this survey, 12 programs were reported as having a significant impact on the education of minority language students. Following are excerpts of this report which focus specifically on the area of reading achievement of students participating in bilingual programs who have transferred from reading in one language to reading in English:

> In a third-year program, both Anglo and Spanish-speaking kindergarten students in the bilingual program exceed city-wide mean and a control group on the Philadelphia Readiness Test...

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> Chinese-dominant students...were at or above district and national norms in English...in three out of six grades, and only .1 (one month) below in two others...
>
> Students in grades K-3 in the French-English bilingual program performed as well as or significantly better than a control group of students in the regular program in all areas tested, including reading and reading readiness, linguistic structures. writing, math concepts, and social science.
>
> ...Spanish-dominant children in the bilingual program scored significantly higher than the control group in grades 3 and 4 in English and reading, while even English-dominant children in the program scored higher than their control group. On the Inter-American Test series, Latino children showed a gradual measurable gain in comparison with an Anglo reference group from pre-school through grade three, and by third grade out-performed their Anglo peers in general ability when tested in both English and Spanish.
>
> Stanford Achievement Test scores from 1975 for reading achievement in English in the fourth and fifth grades were only .6 and .5 years below national norms, respectively, compared to 1.3 and 1.6 years below in 1972 when bilingual education began. Fifth grade reading scores for other BIA Navajo Area schools (without bilingual education) are 1.6 years below Rock Point.
>
> ...the experimentals in both grades 2 and 3 achieved a greater growth in Spanish and English reading than did the controls, as measured by the Inter-American series, and the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). Only in the bilingual class did the children test at grade level or above on the MAT. (Troike, 1978, pp.5-10).

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory also conducted a survey of 108 evaluations and 76 research studies related to bilingual education programs. Because very strict guidelines based on experimental research designs were used, only three evaluations and 12 studies were accepted. A total of 66 findings were encountered. Of these, only 1% were negative, 58% were positive, and 41% neutral (Zappert & Cruz, 1977). These findings are extremely significant because they support bilingual education. Looking at these percentages in a

historical perspective, 41% non-significant data implies that students who before were always one to two years below the national norm are now achieving as well as monolingual speakers of English.

There are other research studies which specifically deal with the transfer of reading from L_1 to L_2. All the studies demonstrate a significant difference in the reading of students in L_2 when they have initially learned to read in L_1. In several of the studies, additional evidence shows that students not only have mastered reading in L_2, but they have also maintained and enriched their reading skills in L_1 (Chapa, 1978; Conner, 1978; Kaufman, 1968; Modiano, 1966; Olesini, 1978; Weffer, 1978).

Other studies go a bit further and identify some of the skills which are considered non-language-specific. That is to say, these skills transfer from reading in L_1 to reading in L_2 with no difficulty. Some of the skills identified were greater competency in analyzing words without the aid of context, greater competency in the comprehension of reading passages, greater reading achievement, and greater ability to spell words (Deemer, 1978; Morgan, 1978). Using Goodman's miscue analysis techniques, researchers have also found that bilingual readers, in English and in Spanish, do not merely process word-by-word, or letter-by-letter, but that they also anticipate and predict their way through written text utilizing their language and experiential background to aid them in reconstructing the author's meaning (Barrera, 1978; Lopez, 1977).

Practitioners in the field of reading have also identified skills which transfer from reading in L_1 to L_2. Thonis, in her book on teaching reading to non-English speakers, identifies some of these basic skills. Among them are most of the reading readiness skills such as auditory perception, visual perception, spatial relationships, left to right progression and so on. Other

skills which are mastered at higher levels include writing skills, syntactic analysis, and comprehension. She also identifies some of the problems which might be encountered by students when transferring from reading in Spanish to reading in English. That Spanish has five constant unchanging vowel sounds may create a problem for the students who need to master many more in English. In addition there are certain sound symbol correspondences in English that do not exist in Spanish (Thonis, 1976).

Evidence clearly demonstrates that a child should begin to read in his native language. Fortunately, many bilingual programs are stressing this fact and have established sound reading programs in L_1.

The question now arises as to how long children should read in their native language before they are transferred to reading in English. A study conducted in Sweden involving Finnish students supports evidence which is constantly being gathered by teachers who have students who have transferred into United States schools from other foreign countries. In Sweden, it was found that the age of the children at the time of transfer made a difference in their educational attainment. If the children transferred at the pre-school or primary level, they scored in the bottom 10% in language skills. However, if the children who transferred were older--between 10 and 12 years old and had had some years of educational experience in their native language in Finland, they approached the norms of the Swedish students when both were tested in Swedish (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976, 1979).

This research, together with many other anecdotal observations, persuasively suggests that, if students were allowed to continue their schooling in their dominant language until ages 10 to 12, they would be more successful when transferring into the curriculum taught through the language of the majority.

This evidence suggests that transferring students from reading in L_1 to reading in L_2 at the end of the second grade is perhaps not the best educational choice for those children. There is a need to carefully look at how well they have mastered reading in L_1 before the decision is made for the transfer to L_2.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the role of oral language and reading skills in the transfer of students from reading in Spanish to reading in English. Through stratified random sampling, 191 fourth-grade students in a bilingual education program were identified as participants in this study.

Through the use of standardized reading tests, a criterion-referenced measure, and an oral language dominance measure, students were classified as efficient and non-efficient readers. A model was developed that identifies those skills which characterize efficient and non-efficient readers in English. The role of reading skills in Spanish was defined as an important aspect of students' readiness to transfer to reading in English.

The following conclusions were drawn based on the analyses of the data:

1. There is a relationship between oral language proficiency in English and reading proficiency in English. The Oral Language Dominance Measure appears to be a reliable instrument for determining English oral language proficiency 75% of the time that it is used.
2. A relationship exists between reading proficiency in Spanish and reading proficiency in English. This finding supports the belief that once a person becomes an efficient reader in one language, making him/her an efficient reader in the

second language. The researcher's supposition that students should be allowed to become efficient readers in Spanish before they transfer to reading in English is strengthened by these findings.

3. The following skills were identified as those skills which would be indicative of efficient and non-efficient readers in English:

   a) consonant clusters/diagraphs

   b) short, long vowels/vowel combinations

   c) compound words/vowel combinations

   d) opposite meaning

   e) multi-meaning

   f) recall of facts

   g) character analysis

   h) figurative language

   The model developed identifies students with a high score in these skills as efficient and those students with a low score as non-efficient.

4. The Inventario de Destrezas does not identify the same reading skills in Spanish as does a standardized reading test in Spanish. One possible explanation may be the subjectivity inherent in the Inventario but does not exclude the need for a reliable checklist of Spanish reading skills. A possibility also exists that the CTBS is not a reliable instrument, thereby clouding some of the results.

5. The Inventario de Destrezas serves as a good indicator of reading ability 60% of the time that it is used. This evidence supports the continued use of the Inventario if administrators are willing to accept the mis-identification of 40% of the students who begin to read in Spanish.
6. The Oral Language Dominance Measure is a good indicator of future success in reading in English. The data indicate, as does the review of the literature on oral language and reading, that oral language is an important component of reading readiness.
7. Variables of age and sex of students do not make a significant difference when students are tested in reading in Spanish and in reading in English. This study's findings then appear applicable to fourth-grade students regardless of sex and age.
8. Place of birth makes a difference when students are tested in English. Students born outside of the United States had a significantly lower mean score when tested with a standardized reading test and an oral language dominance measure in English than did those students who were native born.
9. Income level is significant when students are tested in reading in English. Students who were from a lower SES had a significantly lower mean score than those students who were from a higher SES.
10. Performance in reading in English varies by school. This variance may be due to differences in school administrators,

socioeconomic status, teachers, materials, program implementation, and other factors. Reading in Spanish did not vary by school.

Practical Considerations

The findings of this study have indicated that there is a relationship between oral language and reading skills when transferring students from reading in Spanish to reading in English. However, some of the instruments and procedures being used in making decisions regarding which students are ready for transfer need to be revised. The following recommendations are made to serve practical considerations to be used by teachers and administrators involved in the teaching of reading to bilingual children.

Not only should English oral language skills be the criteria for transfer into reading in English, but the evaluation of mastery of reading in Spanish should be another very important criteria. If a student does not demonstrate mastery of reading skills in L_1, it does not make sense to transfer that student into reading in L_2. More than one instrument should be used and perhaps reading comprehension in the content areas should be another important criteria in light of research findings as to degrees of bilingualism and schooling. Children need a longer exposure to the English language before they are able to handle the content areas. Cummins has suggested that children do need a longer exposure since there are different types of linguistic competencies that are required for social and academic settings. The sole use of one language dominance measure, as was the case of the OLDM in this study, only insures the evaluation of social language and not academic language (Cummins, 1979).

This has been evident not only with the OLDM, but also with such instruments as the Language Assessment Scale (LAS), which practitioners in the field have found to over rate the oral language proficiency of students once students are placed in an all English curriculum. Teachers report that students identified as Level 4 or 5 with the LAS (highest levels) are not able to master school subjects such as math, social studies and science.

The model which was developed through this study to help identify efficient and non-efficient readers in English can be used by teachers in the instruction of reading for students who have transferred from reading in L_1 to reading in L_2. This model specificelly identifies those skills which are not transferrable from Spanish to English reading. If one looks carefully at the list of skills, one can clearly see that the skills do not transfer because they are either non-existent in Spanish, are not as important or are higher level skills which require high mastery and internalization of the English language.

Looking at the specific skills one can see that consonant clusters and short, long vowels do not exist in Spanish as they do in English. It seems, therefore, highly probable that a reader who begins to read in Spanish and aspires to be an efficient English reader must master those skills which are not transferred from Spanish to English.

In the area of structural analysis, test items related to compound words/syllables/contraction were significant. Here again is a case where language structures which exist in one language and not in the other are shown to be important as indicators of good readers. In Spanish, there exist only two contractions (del and al), whereas in English there are many. Words are broken up into syllables differently for both languages. In English, the word

diplomatic would be divided dip-lo-mat-ic; in Spanish, the word diplomatico would be divided di-plo-ma-ti-co. Compound words are not as numerous in Spanish as they are in English.

Within reading vocabulary, opposite meaning and multi-meaning are significant when defining good readers in English. In order to be able to succeed in differentiating meanings in words, the student who is learning to read in English as a second language must become very familiar with the nuances of the language. It is this familiarity with the language that separates a proficient reader from a non-proficient reader in any language.

In the area of reading comprehension, there were three skills which were identified by the model: recall of facts, character analysis, and figurative language. Although inferred meaning was not significant, it is still very much represented by character analysis and figurative language since they are all skills which deal with interpretation of the reading passage by the reader. Recall of facts was highly significant and understandably so since it is the basis for the evaluation of comprehension in most instances. Recall is the most common way to measure, in tests and in the classroom, whether the student grasped the key facts outlined in a reading selection

Having the information provided by the model, a student can be evaluated in these key areas for reading efficiency in English. In addition, and perhaps more important, students who have learned to read in Spanish and are ready to transfer to read in English can be taught more effectively and efficiently to read in the second language if more of the instructional time is devoted to the specific skills identified by the model.

The data also showed that students born outside the United States and students from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) had lower scores when they were

tested in English. The implications for these findings are, and should be, overwhelming since our practice in the public schools is to test everyone with standardized tests regardless of SES and ethnicity. It seems logical to suggest that other evaluation criteria be used to assess learning as it relates to these students. The use of criterion referenced tests would be a much better means of assessing students learning. Not only would CRT's be more appropriate for evaluation, but they would also provide valuable prescriptive information for classroom use.

Another factor which was brought out in this study was that students mean scores in reading in English varied significantly by schools. Nine schools were included in the study which contained similar populations. This finding supports research in the area of school effectiveness, which has been conducted in the last 10 to 15 years, that states that schools indeed do make a difference. The difference as reported by researchers lies to a great extent in the role that the principal plays in the school. When the principal is the instructional leader, when the climate of the school is positive, and when teachers have high expectations, students, especially low SES students, perform much better on standardized tests. (Edmonds, 1979).

Conclusion

My presentation today has reviewed in part some of the research available regarding the transferrability of skills from Spanish to English reading.

I have provided you with additional information based on a study conducted which included 191 students who were in a bilingual program and had initial reading instruction in Spanish and were at the end of two years transferred to reading in English.

I have taken the data and conclusions and have given you some practical applications to be used by teachers and administrators involved with bilingual programs.

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